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P O E M,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

ASSOCIATION OF THE ALUMNI OF WASHINGTON COLLEGE,

BY

REV. JOSEPH H. NICHOLS.



THE FUTURE.

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POEM,

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

ASSOCIATION OF THE ALUMNI OF WASHINGTON COLLEGE,

IN

CHRIST CHURCH, HARTFORD, AUGUST 3, 1842.

33
BY REV. JOSEPH H. NICHOLS.



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THE FUTURE.

'Tis not becoming always to be grave ;
Even he whose holy office is to save
The souls of men, should sometimes wear a smile,
The wild and wayward easier to beguile
To virtue's path ; and, oft, 'tis good and wise,
To put on pastime's gay and silken guise,
Instead of duty's iron panoply,
And, for a while, a harmless trifler be.
Such stand I here. The pastor's sable gown,
The tone professional, the solemn frown,
I cast aside, and o'er my shoulder fling
A strange rude harp, that scarce knows how to sing.

And yet a touching moral has my theme,
As doth this consecrated place beseem.
Here, as I speak within these reverend walls,
Where a soft light from each arched window falls
On vault, and pillar, and on altar shrine
And listening groups, with tints that seem divine ;
Here, in this temple built to God alone,
Where breathes eternity in every stone,
I sing, *The Future*. Some among this throng
May find a sermon hid beneath a song.

The Future ! What a world of fancies starts
 At once to life, when that name strikes our hearts !
 Thought chases thought so swiftly, that the Muse
 Scarce knows what to accept, or what refuse.
 Source of bright hope, and source of gloomy dread,
 Joy of the living, comfort of the dead,
 Or else their woe,—the secrets of high heaven,
 And of deep hell, are to thy keeping given.
 The Past the soul contents not, though it be
 One fairy picture of felicity.
 'Tis not enough our childhood to renew,
 And the old home where first our breath we drew ;
 The sacred household circle to recall,
 And the loved portraits ranged along the wall,
 And the white roses clustering round the door,
 Or by the village brook to play once more ;
 'Tis not enough, with Memory's pleasing pain,
 Long-buried forms to wake to life again ;
 'Tis not enough to open the green tomb,
 And bid the beautiful once more to bloom
 Before our eyes, as once they bloomed, and tell
 If Love lights up the mansions where they dwell.
 Nor does the Present quench the soul's desires :
 It glows, it burns, with hid ambitious fires,
 For something yet to come. Our life may seem
 Like the fulfilment of some heavenly dream ;
 Though mortals, we, like children of the skies,
 In bliss may prove—high angels in disguise ;
 No rising cloud may in the distance lie,
 Nor e'en a rainbow tell of storms gone by ;
 Yet man, uneasy man, will ask for more,
 And longs the untried future to explore.

The mother, as above her babe's sweet face
 She bends, and traces the commingled grace
 Of her loved lord's and hers, in its arch smile,
 And reads the language of each infant wile,—
 Say, does her child's strange beauty quite engross
 Her mind ?—the color of his eyes—the gloss
 Of his soft silken hair, and the high brow,
 Where sits enthroned deep intellect even now ?
 Oh, no. She thinks, too, of his future fate,
 What fortunes shall his coming years await ;
 And should she build for him a lofty name,
 And place him high upon the roll of fame,
 Great 'mid the great, among the stars *the* star,
 All common orbs, though bright, outshining far ;
 If on his head a monarch's crown she lays,
 The warrior's chaplet, or the poet's bays,
 Or the fair mitre of the prelate, deem
 Not harshly of her ;—'tis each mother's dream.

The curtain of futurity to raise,
 And its deep secrets pierce with daring gaze ;
 To know what shall befall our after years,
 Dark storm or sunshine, joy or sorrow's tears,
 Is the fond wish of all. Both young and old
 Would see the map of human life unrolled.
 And who has not held forth his trembling hand
 By the sage fortune-teller to be scanned ?
 And who has not at slightest omens caught,
 As if with our true history they were fraught ?
 It gives a pleasure to the strongest mind,
 The four-leaved clover in the grass to find :
 The wisest would, if the plain truth were told,

O'er the *right* shoulder the new moon behold ;
 For call it weakness, call it what you will,
Some superstition fills each bosom still.

Yet God, in mercy to a thing so frail,
 Made man short-sighted, nor lifts up the veil.
 Nobly to spend the present passing hour,
 Nobly to put forth every hidden power,
 Nobly your heaven-allotted part to play,
 In the brief drama of life's changing day,
 Is best. What *shall* be, leave for what we *are*,
 The future of the future will take care.
 Would David, when a shepherd-boy he played
 By Bethlehem's streams, beneath the palm-tree's shade,
 Upon his harp, unto his listening flock,
 Would it have added to his pleasure's stock,
 Would it have given his harp a sweeter spell,
 Would it have given his voice a richer swell,
 Would it have lent the fresh bloom of his youth,
 (The beauty that came down to him from Ruth,
 His ancestress so fair,) new charms, if known
 'Twere to his breast, that he should fill a throne ?
 That the same voice, and cunning instrument,
 A monarch's palace and a soldier's tent
 Should gently soothe ; or he the bright array
 Of armies should with regal glance survey ;
 Or, in the thickest of the fight, his crest
 And plume should toss, out-dazzling all the rest ?
 Far happier he, as there he sat among
 His sheep, in pastoral innocence, and sung
 By the swift-flowing brooks, old Hebrew airs,
 Of greatness quite unconscious, and its cares,

Than if his coming glory and renown
Had to his wondering boyish eyes been shown.

Yes, 'tis a blest exemption, not to bear
The fatal gift, which some would long to share,
Of second-sight. Oh, were it ours to know
What is to be, 'twould reason overthrow
From her high seat ! Bewildered quite, and stunned
At the strange prospects that unfold beyond
The misty barrier of the future,—pale
Would grow our cheeks at the eventful tale !
Reality so different from the sketch
Of the clear summer heaven, that was to stretch
So brightly o'er our heads, by fancy drawn,
And youth's fond visions all dissolved and gone !

'Tis evening, on a purple southern sea :
The large thick stars, in tropic purity,
Are flashing from the blue, low-bending skies,
On a lone isle, that green beneath them lies.
Out in full blossom shine the orange groves,
And lo ! amid their bowers a maiden roves—
A fair, West Indian girl ; then, takes her seat
To breathe the fragrance of those flowers so sweet.
She touches her guitar, and with a strain
Of superhuman softness, doth enchain
The winds in silence : smiling in their sleep, .
Repose the murmuring billows of the deep.
To join her, soon comes forth a virgin band
Of her companions, tripping hand in hand.
A slave strikes up the tambourine, and she
Floats in the dance to some wild island glee ;

In peerless elegance that maid moves on,
 Of all her sex, in grace, the paragon.
 Her dark eye kindles with imperial light,
 A golden crown is glittering in her sight,
 For some gray prophetess foretold, ere now,
 A diadem should decorate her brow.

Again, broad day-light sheds its sunny smile
 Within a tall cathedral's ancient pile ;
 Along the aisles, brave men, line after line,
 Beneath their banners in bright armor shine ;
 The galleries gleam with beauty's jewelled forms,
 And warlike music every bosom warms.
 It ceases : all direct their anxious gaze
 To the high altar, where, amid the blaze
 Of princesses and princes, stand alone
 A man and woman, each before a throne ;
 He, the stern chief, whose footsteps shook the globe,
 She, in that long and royal crimson robe,
 Is that same fair West Indian. One rich crown
 He puts on his own brow ; then, she kneels down,
 And modestly, from his small hand, receives
 Another crown—a wreath of golden leaves,
 Upon her forehead ; while his eagle glance,
 Reflecting her's, proclaims her Queen of France.
 The trumpet peals it forth in joyous swells,
 And far as her green isle the tidings tells.

Again, in Malmaison, that lady's seen,
 A wife, yet no wife ; queen, yet not a queen.
 If nature's charms could ever banish grief,
 The heaviest bosom there might find relief ;

The garden blooms, the fountain flows in vain,
 Not Eden's scenery could assuage her pain.
 He, who his greatness owed to her alone,
 Has called another bride to share his throne !
 Discarded, she loves still, and woman's tears
 She sheds, when of her hero's fall she hears.
 Too sharp the trial ! Pensive, day by day,
 She sits, and pines, at last, her life away.
 Now cold, and closed in death's meek sleep her eyes,
 Pale on her bier, the lovely Empress lies !
 White as her shroud, her crossed hands calmly rest
 Upon that generous and confiding breast.
 There, her lone orphans love's last vigil keep,
 And earth's great kings pass by, and muse and weep.
 Oh, what young maiden here would be a queen,
 Who thinks of thy sad fate, poor Josephine !
 Who would not rather, than of courts the pride,
 Be gathering berries on the mountain side ?

'Tis sweet to think, that when we are no more,
 Our names shall still be fondly whispered o'er ;
 That the same walk, the brook, the hill, the grove,
 Our forms shall haunt where we were wont to rove ;
 And so memorials of ourselves we give,
 That, after death, lamented, we may live.
 Some leave a flower, and some a leaf bestow,
 And some a ring of gold, their love to show ;
 And some their picture, where the blooming cheek
 And bright eye, answering your's, like life, yet speak.
 And some present, too, when about to die,
 A lock of hair, to be remembered by.

Frail, frail mementos ! yet what eloquence,
 What comfort do they to our hearts dispense !
 The gift recalls the giver to the mind ;
 There, there, the lost friend's image is enshrined ;
 His smile we see, his very voice we hear,
 Oft as we view it in each after year.

Some, for that phantom, posthumous renown,
 Build the tall tower, and some usurp a crown ;
 Some carve a statue from the solid rock ;
 Some play the hero in the battle's shock ;
 And some, with slow and faithful pencil, trace
 On the bare canvass, nature's tints and grace ;
 And some, inspired with heaven's own genuine fire,
 Recite melodious verses to the lyre.

Some, too, while living, would enjoy the blaze
 They kindle, and attract the crowd's fixed gaze ;
 And, not content with monumental fame,
 Would snatch a foretaste of a deathless name :
 For sweet to rising merit are the smiles
 Which from earth's proudest children it beguiles,
 And sweet to feel the strong commanding power,
 Which Genius lends to those who share its dower.
 It rules the multitude with magic rod,
 And gives to man the bearing of a god ;
 The young, the old, the good, the fair, it sways,
 And draws from all involuntary praise ;
 Envy beholds it with admiring eyes,
 And critics, too, forget to criticise,
 And pay, not slowly, but with generous haste,
 The tribute of discriminating taste.

To him, the mightiest in subjection bow,
 Who, o'er his fellows, lifts his laurelled brow ;
 And therefore wisest men will not disdain
 Contemporaneous applause to gain.

When youthful Johnson, from his native town,
 Pensive set forth for London and renown,
 And with a tear to Litchfield, said adieu,
 As Litchfield's spires slow faded from his view ;
 Say, as he felt that no inglorious fate,
 No vulgar fortunes should his name await,
 But knew, by deep prophetic consciousness,
 That ceaseless ages he was born to bless,
 What cheered his breast ? what soothed the rising pang ?
 Was it the thought, that fame's far-sounding clang
 The glory of his noble works should spread,
 Long after he lay slumbering with the dead ?
 No, 'twas this thought that made his bosom burn :
 To Litchfield's vales the wanderer would return,
 And with his old companions, side by side,
 Together walk, their wonder and their pride.

And who is there, so selfish and so cold,
 As from desert its chaplet to withhold ?
 No : living or departed, still let worth
 Rewarded go, and have a name on earth.
 Let the bright ornaments that bless our race,
 While man survives, in man's heart have a place ;
 Give them their meed while here, and canonize
 Their memories when gone to Paradise.
 Men, who for country have unsheathed their swords,
 Men, who for her have uttered burning words,

Men, who have struck their harps to truth and heaven,
Let fadeless honors to their deeds be given.

One friend I knew!—it seems but yesterday,
In the cold earth I laid his colder clay.
The angel Muses on his cradle smiled,
And Poesy acknowledged him her child ;
Gentle as woman's was his soul, yet bold
As some old master's verse, his numbers rolled.
But, ah, he died. Snatched, snatched away too soon,
His sun went down at manhood's golden noon.
Last of his name, he fell as falls the oak,
Last of the forest, by the tempest's stroke.
No time can from my mind that scene efface,
When sad we bore him to his resting place ;
'Twas winter wild, and leafless were the trees,
The tolling bell came moaning on the breeze :
On the sear earth the light snow scattered lay,
As still and slow, in funeral array,
Down through the woods the long procession wound,
To place the poet's form in hallowed ground.
'Twas there my mournful privilege to read,
While round me many a broken heart did bleed,
The soothing, solemn service of the dead,
Ere closed the earth above the minstrel's head.
Sweet bard ! bright scholar ! gentle be thy rest,
Till thou resume thy lyre among the blest.
Accept these flowers of song from one who, late,
Hillhouse ! thy tomb comes now to decorate.

But to return from this discursive strain :
The Future wakens mingled joy and pain ;

We partly hope, and partly, too, we fear,
 If not for our own selves, for friends as dear.
 To purest faith the view is not serene,
 Some dark portentous mists will intervene;
 The mortal on the immortal will infringe,
 And flesh o'er spirit cast a gloomy tinge.
 The brightest path is checkered light and shade,—
 And when no actual storms our peace invade,
 The idle fancy, bent on sombre mood,
 Loves o'er ideal shapes of ill to brood.
 No minds but angels' minds have self-control,
 And make a perfect vassal of the soul.
 The intellectual giants of the earth,
 Betray the weakness of their mortal birth;
 The man who towers above men like a god,
 Still shows that he was moulded from the clod:
 Vague apprehensions, dim forebodings haunt
 His spirit, which no charm can disenchant;
 And e'en the saints, when their last hour is come,
 Though sure to soar to a celestial home,
 Though sure the white robe, and green palm await
 Their advent to heaven's opened golden gate,
 Still back to earth a sorrowing glance will turn,
 And for earth's loved ones passionately yearn.

So, when great Hobart on his death-bed lay,
 Fall'n, like some knight, when armed in full array,
 And to the champion's fixed enraptured sight,
 The Church in Glory showed her towers of light;
 From her he forced away his gaze, and thought
 Of her below, for whom he long had fought.
 And as he saw the setting beams of day

Upon his chamber's walls the last time play,
 At the low orb a pensive look he threw,
 And bade the beauteous sun a fond adieu !
 Then, waited for his long-expected wife,
 To soothe and watch the pang of parting life :
 The mellow stage-horn blew ; he, anxious, cried,
 " And has she come ? " " She has not," they replied ;
 " Then raise me in my couch, and point my eyes,"
 He said, " where my loved home and city lies."
 They raised him. Long and tenderly he gazed ;
 Pale grew his cheek ; a sudden dimness glazed
 His struggling sight ; a bright smile swiftly passed
 Across his face, and Hobart breathed his last !

And thou, my country ! will the Future bring
 To thee thine ancient freedom, or a king ?
 Wilt thou advance in virtue and renown,
 Or in the nations' general wreck go down ?
 To Him, who did a name for thee create
 Beneath the sun, to God we leave thy fate !
 Whate'er it be, my heart shall ever true
 And filial prove, my native land, to you.
 Though in my breast the wish will sometimes rise,
 To visit other shores, and other skies ;
 Though I may long to cross the ocean's waves,
 And muse o'er my forefathers' ancient graves ;
 Though I may oft send up a hopeful sigh,
 To see green England's isle before I die :
 Within her gray cathedrals' walls to tread,
 And softly step where sleep the illustrious dead ;
 To watch the yellow sun-light richly pour
 Through pictured panes upon the marble floor ;

To hear the choral anthem swell, and feel
 The wrapt soul on its pinions heavenward steal :
 To wander in the academic shade,
 Where youthful Spenser on his harp first played,
 Where Sydney strolled, before he shone in arms,
 With that fair face of more than mortal charms :
 To walk the battle-fields, where, host with host,
 By kings led on, their glittering lances crossed :
 To feel my spirit kindle, as I roam
 O'er ground bedewed with blood of martyrdom,
 Where lofty Cranmer, and unbending Laud
 Laid down their lives for principle and God ;
 Or, England, 'mid thy hawthorn flowers to stray,
 And bid thy nightingales teach me their lay ;
 Or, in thy rural hospitable homes,
 Hear the sweet welcome that from kinsmen comes ;
 Though with such wishes, oft, my bosom pine,
 My heart, my heart, my country ! still is thine.
 Thy cliffs, thy streams, thy very thunder's roll,
 And cataract's dash are graven on my soul !
 Aye, glorious or inglorious be thy doom,
 Here would I live, and here would choose my tomb.
 Thine are and have been men of angel worth,
 The master-spirits that control the earth ;
 Thine a redeeming *few*, a chosen band,
 Whose names, like watchwords, pass from land to land,
 And summon up the blood, and wake a thrill
 In all who goodness, greatness, cherish still.

And will such men, my country, yet be thine ?
 Be yours to keep unbroken the bright line,
 Who, from a calm and hermit-like retreat,
 My humble song have called me to repeat.

And you, loved youths, from whose cheeks, fresh and red,
 Life's vernal roses will ere long be fled ;
 You, who to-morrow spread your untried sails
 Before a strange world's rude, capricious gales ;
 Who, from yon classic halls, with heavy heart,
 To meet no more on earth, shall then depart ;
 Oh, be it yours to guard your country's fame,
 And hers who gives you, now, a scholar's name.
 Whate'er your sphere, adorn it with that mind
 Which God for pure and noble thought designed :
 Then, though youth fade, immortal you will bloom,
 In the Great Future hid, beyond the tomb !

My song is o'er. No longer may I sing
 To those accustomed to a sweeter string.
 Here on this spot, the Muses' ancient home,
 How dare a stranger's tuneless harp to come ?
 Here, gentle Trumbull lived, and long ago
 His playful numbers smoothly taught to flow :
 Here, Brainerd, on yon river's banks reclined,
 Wooed with his sylvan reed the summer wind ;
 And here still sounds her* silver lute, whose tone
 No rival sister in the land doth own ;
 And here, disguised in reverend attire,
 Two minstrelst† wake with master hand the lyre.
 Say, will they not at his bold coming frown,
 Who climbs Parnassus for a laurel crown ?
 Say, will they not the candidate discard ?
 Will brother pastors own a brother bard ?
 If so, with joy to my monastic cell
 I'll go, and bid the world and you FAREWELL !

* Mrs. Sigourney.

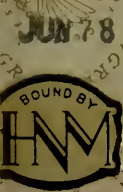
† The Rev. George Burgess and the Rev. Arthur C. Cox.



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